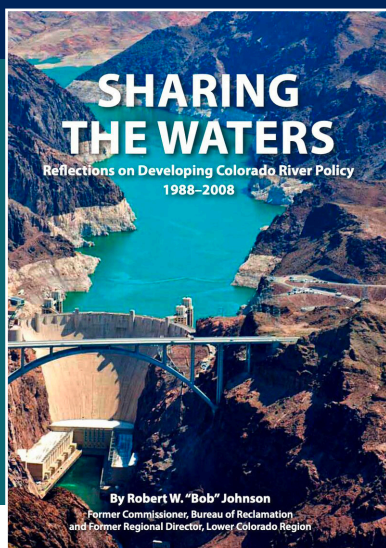




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Guidance for Restoring Peace on the Colorado River: A Review of *Sharing the Waters: Reflections on Developing Colorado River Policy 1988–2008* by Robert W. “Bob” Johnson

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These are contentious times for Colorado River policy, with strained relations between the Upper and Lower Basin states in public view. It is, therefore, perfect timing for me to recommend adding the book, *Sharing the Waters: Reflections on Developing Colorado River Policy 1988–2008*, by Robert W.

“Bob” Johnson, to your 2025 reading list. At only 124 pages, this

powerful little book is packed with concise explanations of key Colorado River management matters, along with personal insights on how highly contentious river matters have been effectively navigated in the past—insights that are highly relevant today. The book, published posthumously, also features many great photos, including this review’s accompanying photo heralding peace on the Colorado River.

An agricultural economist, Bob Johnson started his career at the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation in 1975. He rose through the ranks to serve as Commissioner of Reclamation from October 2006 until his January 2009 retirement from federal service. The 20-year period of focus, therefore, includes the perspectives of his various staff positions, as well as the Commissioner role. The book examines Colorado River issues and tells the stories of the people and organizations working to address them. In sharing his knowledge and experiences, Bob Johnson explains the difficulties associated with coming to resolution, discusses his commitment to working with all individuals and organizations with the respect and patience that are needed to build trust, and even expresses his frustrations with some of his interactions. The book is powerful in part because Bob gets to the point quickly and pulls no punches. He tells things as he saw them, even if at times the picture is unflattering.

After providing an overview of the “Law of the River,” ten chapters lay out the challenges that had to be addressed during the 20-year period of focus. The first eight numbered chapters focus on major issues: (1) limits on Lower Basin entitlements, (2) water banking and interstate water marketing, (3) Central Arizona Project, (4) the Quantification Settlement Agreement, (5) endangered species on the Lower Colorado River, (6) the Yuma Desalting Plant, (7) U.S.-Mexico relations on the river, and (8) drought and the 2007 Interim Guidelines. The last two chapters offer lessons learned and considerations for the Colorado River’s future.

The book’s stories and insights will be interesting to long-term Colorado River “insiders,” relative newcomers to Colorado River Basin issues, or people with only a general interest. Those with long-time involvement may or may not agree with some of the opinions expressed. As someone whose deep involvement with Colorado River matters started about the time Bob Johnson retired, I appreciated the opportunity to learn from the stories of an insider with significant decision-making influence and/or responsibilities. Those unfamiliar with the matters



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of the 1988 to 2008 time period will undoubtedly gain understanding and appreciation of the depth and complexity of the challenges and how hard so many worked to address them.

Sharing the Waters is about successful approaches to working through complex problems that may have seemed insurmountable at the time. Spoiler alert! Here are five of the twelve lessons listed in Chapter 9 that struck me as particularly relevant to today: Relationships are important to reaching consensus; Prior appropriation is the major cause of most water disputes in the Western states; Water deals take a long time to negotiate; Treat your enemies like your friends; Compromise is not a bad term. The final chapter offers nine considerations for Reclamation, the

Colorado River Basin states, and Tribes to bear in mind as they work on new operating guidelines. While I will not list here the various considerations/recommendations laid out in Chapter 10, I will note that some reflect Bob Johnson’s background in economics, a background that he and I share, in explicitly mentioning changes to pricing practices and/or marketing. On page 109, Bob offers these words about his suggestions: “Others may have different views, and I understand some of these considerations may be controversial. However, under such dire circumstances, bold actions are called for. Every effort must be made to keep the project viable. Tradeoffs must be made when reservoirs are so depleted as to constitute emergency conditions. I hope these tradeoffs can be used to develop consensus solutions.”

The final parts of the book include some closing remarks by the author, which focus on the people aspects of working on these thorny water matters. Again, I would like to quote Bob, who states: “I don’t think a permanent resolution of all the issues can ever be achieved. The Law of the River must be able to evolve as circumstances on the river change.” Bob ends on a hopeful note: “I am optimistic that the Basin States, the Indian tribes and the Secretary of the Interior will be able to reach consensus on the changes that are needed today.”

The book begins and concludes with words of others. The Foreword by former Secretary of the Interior Bruce Babbitt and final sections titled “Appreciations” and “Employees’ Message” make it clear that Bob Johnson was highly respected and beloved for his sincerity, commitment, and integrity. He served as a role model and mentor to many.

Bob Johnson was a true public servant who worked steadfastly on behalf of the Colorado River Basin and the United States. *Sharing the Waters* provides an opportunity to learn from and build upon his reflections. Let’s hope that those now in decision-making roles honor Robert W. “Bob” Johnson’s legacy by achieving peace on the Colorado River.



Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt (seated, second from right), with Lower Colorado Regional Director Bob Johnson to his left, Deputy Secretary David Hayes and Upper Colorado Regional Director Rick Gold to his right, along with staff from the Interior Department’s Solicitor’s Office, Reclamation, National Park Service, and Brown and Caldwell, at the signing of the Interim Surplus Guidelines Record of Decision, January 21, 2001. Photo Source: U.S. Bureau of Reclamation

Sharing the Waters: Reflections on Developing Colorado River Policy 1988–2008 is available from the Water Education Foundation at <https://watereducation.app.neoncrm.com/forms/donate>.

To learn more about Commissioner Bob Johnson, read *Irrigation Leader*, February 2024 Special Issue: <https://irrigationleadermagazine.com/bob-johnson-special-edition-2024/>.

